

Congressional Notes



Cramming

Invalid Or Unclear Charges On Your Constituents' Local Telephone Bills

Cramming is a term sometimes used to describe the practice of adding charges to constituents' local telephone company bills for services that are not clearly described. In many cases, constituents claim they are being billed for services they did not order.

The FCC is very concerned about these types of charges and has urged local telephone companies and other billing service providers to work with the FCC in order to adopt an industry code of practice to prevent cramming.

Examples of cramming include charges for:

- calls that were not made by the constituents or that were placed to toll-free numbers;
- services that are explained only in general terms, such as "voicemail," or "calling plan," or "membership;"
- "800 number service;" and
- services identified as "monthly fee" that appear on a monthly basis.

How Invalid Or Unclear Charges Occur

Local telephone companies commonly serve as billing agents for many long distance and telephone information service providers. Examples of telephone information services include psychic advice; product information; and so-called "adult" services and "chat" lines.

Most of these charges are incurred by constituents by either placing specific calls or authorizing companies to provide specific types of telephone services. For many constituents, it is convenient to have these charges included on their local telephone bills.

Invalid or unclear charges can occur when long distance telephone companies or telephone information service providers send inaccurate billing data -- whether through oversight or intentionally -- to the local telephone companies. The local telephone companies, in turn, bill constituents for the calls or services.

Unclear charges also occur when long distance telephone companies or information service providers legitimately impose charges but either insufficiently or improperly describe the services for which the constituents are being billed.